

# MAN and SOCIETY

A Journal of North-East Studies

VOLUME XVII ♦ WINTER 2020



ICSSR-NERC

Indian Council of Social Science Research  
North Eastern Regional Centre  
Shillong, Meghalaya

## Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India:

### A Case Study in Dibrugarh District of Assam

Gitamoni Handique Gogoi\*

#### *Abstract*

*India is a country of villages and about 70 percent of its population lives in rural areas. Rural development can only change the socio-economic life of the people as well as the national economy of the country. Rural women can play an important role in the development of rural areas as they constitute about half of the total rural population. Therefore, their active participation in socio-economic and political processes is necessary for the overall growth and development of rural areas. There are various provisions in the Constitution of India for the empowerment of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act provides some important provisions to encourage women to participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. In this study, an attempt has been made to know about the participation of rural women in the Panchayati Raj System. It is a case study conducted within the district of Dibrugarh, Assam. From the study, it is found that women are politically empowered after the inclusion of the reservation provision for women in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act. The number of women participating in politics is increasing at a higher rate than men. The study also reveals that all the representatives are not equally competent to perform their duties.*

**Keywords:** Participation, politics, decision-making, constitution, panchayat, rural, empower, PRI, amendment.

#### **Introduction**

A nation can expect all-round development if there is full cooperation of men and women in the socio-economic and political process of the country. A society may go in the right direction if women take part in the decision-

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\* The author is Assistant Professor, HCDG College, Nitaipukhuri, Sivasagar.

making process of the country. Mahatma Gandhi once said that the full and balanced development of a nation is possible only when women participate actively and fully in the political deliberations of the nation. They can play a very significant role in building a decent nation through their full participation in the all-round development process. To make them an equal partner in the development process, the empowerment of women is imperative. In India, constitutionally men and women are equal, but women are the most neglected and deprived sections of our society. Low level of education, poor health and nutrition, socio-economic, political, cultural and demographic factors, customs and traditions are the main factors that influence the women's participation in the process of development and change of our rural society.

Participation in politics is a means to influence the decision-making capacity of people from all sections of society, community, caste, religion, etc. It implies the involvement of individuals and groups in political activities such as casting vote or participating in the election process or contesting in different elections at various levels. It also refers to people's involvement in politics which directly or indirectly influences the governmental machinery. Almond and Powell have defined political participation as "The involvement of members of the society in the decision-making process of the system" (Almond and Powell., 1966: 314). Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is considered as the most effective platform for Indian rural women for their political empowerment.

Women's participation in Indian politics began in the twentieth century. The global concern for women's participation was noticed in 1975 when the decade was declared as the women's development decade. In this decade, some resolutions were adopted for women's participation in politics. This was followed by the Nairobi Conference in 1985, which called upon the participating countries to take steps for ensuring women's participation in politics through the reservation of 35 percent seats in all elections (Dutta

and Sen, 2003: 2-3).

The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) has been considered as a step towards equality. It encourages Indian rural women to participate in politics. In 1957 Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (BMC) suggested a three-tier Panchayati Raj System at the grassroots level and women's equal participation with men in all rural development activities. Accordingly, Panchayati Raj was first introduced in India in the year 1959 on the recommendation of this committee. The Women's Status Committee (WSC) first spoke about statutory Panchayats in 1974. The Ashok Mehta Committee (AMC) in 1977 also suggested a viable organisation for grassroots institutions. Rajiv Gandhi Government tried to give it a statutory shape through the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats by the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill. Later, the 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill has given it a statutory shape (Mohapatra and Tripathy, 2001: 43). The year 1992 was a landmark in the Indian history of politics in which the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed. The Act reserved 33 percent of the total seats for women in Panchayats (73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992). There are 2,32,278 village panchayats, 5,905 intermediate panchayats and 499 district panchayats, making a total of 2,38,682 at all the three levels of Panchayat in India. (Subrahmanyam, 2002: 30).

Assam was considered as a pioneer among other states of India about the establishment of PRIs. The Government of Assam passed the Rural Panchayat Act, 1948 in 1948. The Act introduced two types of Panchayats such as - Primary Panchayat and Rural Panchayat. Thirty-four functions have been enumerated in this Act (The Rural Panchayat Act, 1948). The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1959 was passed in the year 1959. Under this Act, a three-tier system of the panchayat was set up viz. Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mohkuma Parishad (The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1959). In the year 1972, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972, was passed with a two-tier system viz- Gaon Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad. The Act

divided the functions of the Gaon Panchayats into nine heads covering all aspects of rural life (The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972). After 14 years of passing this Act, another Act was passed which was known as The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986. It was implemented in the year 1989. The Act reduced the size of Gaon panchayat to make peoples' participation more extensive and effective (The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986).

In response to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, the Government of Assam passed the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994. The Act is applicable for the whole of Assam in the rural areas except the autonomous districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The Act introduced a three-tier Panchayats viz., Gaon Panchyat, Anchalik Panchyat and Zilla Parishad. The Act made a five-year term of office of Panchayat representatives at every level. The Act is very significant because it has reserved 33 percent seats and political offices for women in Panchayats including the number of seats for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994). The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 wants to empower women, develop women's potentiality, talents, capacity building and involvement in the decision-making process. The first Assam Panchayat election, 2001 was the milestone for the political empowerment of rural women because the reservation of seats for women in panchayats was first introduced in this election.

The Cabinet of India approved a proposal for increasing the reservation of directly elected seats for women from one-third to fifty percent in all the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj System in India on August 27, 2009. It amended Article 243(D) (3) of the Indian Constitution (Sing & Gandhi, 2015: 81). The Assam State Election Commission announced 50 percent of the reservation of seats for women in the panchayat election 2013. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 has been amended for giving a 50 percent reservation for the women in panchayats (Kalita, 2019: 21-22). Though the constitution provides reservation to women in panchayats,

women participation in PRI is very poor and negligible.

#### **Review of Literature:**

Some work has already been done by different academicians and research scholars on different issues like Panchayati Raj Institutions, women in panchayats, women in politics, women empowerment, economic empowerment of women and other women related issues of India. But only limited works have been done on women's participation in panchayats throughout the country. Some literature is reviewed to find the research gap in the selected area of study.

"Women in Rural Areas" is written by K. Papa suggested that cultural and social reforms in society are very important for the development of women, including the improvement of their educational status (Papa, 1992). J. K. Pallai in "Women and Empowerment" depicts that rights, socio-economic and educational development of women can empower women (Pallai, 1995). N. Sinha in "Women in Politics" highlighted that environmental, socio-economic, political and cultural factors are directly related to the participation of women in politics (Sinha, 2000). V.M. Rao in "Empowering Rural Women" identified some problems of women members in Panchayat bodies and also offers some suggestions to facilitate the process of empowerment of women members in the Panchayat bodies (Rao, 2004). A. Sinha in "Panchyati Raj: Women Changing Governance", said that the one-third reservation system of the Panchayati Raj helped women to empower politically and gaining control over resources (Sinha, 2004: 32-33). "Political Participation of Women and the Dialectics of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment" is written by H.D. Hazarika recommended that sensitization, training and capacity building of both men and women are the primary condition to implement the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act (Hazarika, 2006: 245-260). L.M. Singh in his paper "Women and Electoral Politics in Manipur" analyses the performance of women candidates in the elections held in Manipur since its merger to the Indian union (Singh, 2006: 32-36).

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S.K. Das in his paper "An analysis of constraints in women empowerment in Tribal are: Evidences from Assam" examines the constraints of women empowerment in the tribal areas of Assam. To him, the main reason for the poor empowerment of tribal women was a lack of knowledge about new technology and information (Das, 2012: 61-74). S. Agnihotri and V. Singh in "Women Empowerment through Reservation in Panchyati Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh" said that several factors such as- illiteracy, traditionalism, prejudices and economic conditions are responsible for women's low participation in panchayats (Agnihotri & Singh, 2014: 417-425). K.N. Doddamani in "Empowerment of Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institution in Gulbarga District in Karnataka" analyses the empowerment of women representatives in the Gulbarga district of Karnataka, India (Doddamani, 2014: 09- 14). "Women Participation in Panchyati Raj: A Case Study of Karimganj District" is written by S. Das stated that Panchyati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provide the opportunity to the rural masses to involve themselves at the grass-root level to achieve all the national challenges (Das, 2014).

From the review of literature, it is observed that no such research works have been done on women's participation in panchayats in the district of Dibrugarh, Assam. Hence, it is an attempt to bridge the research gap in this area. The paper highlights the actual participation of rural women in politics, especially in Panchayats of Assam.

#### **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To know the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
2. To study various factors which influence the rural women in political participation.
3. To identify various constraints that hamper in the effective political participation of rural women in the Panchayats.

### Methodology

The study is a descriptive research which is conducted within the district of Dibrugarh, Assam. Out of 33 districts of Assam, the Dibrugarh district is selected based on the lottery method. The study is based on both Primary and Secondary data. Primary data is collected from the respondents of the study area through an interview schedule. Elected women panchayat representatives of the last panchayat election of Assam, 2018 under the Dibrugarh district are considered as the size of the population. The study is conducted in a sample area of three Development Blocks viz., Barbaruah, Tengakhata and Panitula Block of Dibrugarh district. At first, the Barbaruah block is selected as a sample block for the study because the total number of women representatives is close to the arithmetic mean value of elected women representatives of seven blocks under the Dibrugarh district. Secondly, the Tengakhata block is selected for having the highest number of elected women representatives among the seven blocks of the district. Finally, the Panitula block is selected because it has the lowest number of elected women representatives among these seven blocks of the district. Out of the total number of 271 women elected panchayat representatives of three selected blocks, 25 percent of representatives from each block are randomly selected as sample respondents. The total selected 68 (25%) respondents from three blocks include –24 respondents from Barbaruah Block, 28 respondents from Tengakhata block and 16 respondents from Panitula Block. The respondents are women representatives of Zilla Parishads (ZPs), Anchalik Panchayats (APs) and Gaon Panchayats (GPs). Secondary data is collected from the three selected Development Blocks, District Rural Development Agency, Statistical office of Dibrugarh, Journals and periodicals, websites, etc. The information and data collected for this study are analysed with the help of tables, numerical data and percentages. Finally, after analysing various information and data, a conclusion is drawn to fulfill the objectives of this study.

### Scope of the Study

The study covers the participation of rural women in the panchayat election of Assam, 2018 in the Dibrugarh district. It focuses on the analysis of various demographic aspects of elected women panchayat representatives. Various problems concerning the effective participation of rural women in panchayat politics are also analysed in this study.

### Limitations of the Study

It is a micro-level study, which tries to know about the political participation of rural women who were elected as panchayat representatives in the Panchayat Election 2018 under the Dibrugarh District. Therefore, it can be generalised only in the state of Assam.

### Major Findings of the study

Panchayati Raj System encourages rural women to take part in the decision-making process of rural development. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, Panchayat elections were held in the year 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2018 respectively in the state of Assam. In the Panchayat election of 2018, a total number of 420 representatives and 21 chairpersons of Zilla Parishad, 2,201 representatives and 185 chairpersons of Anchalik panchayat and 2,201 Gaon Panchayat Presidents and 24,222 Gaon Panchayat members were elected in Assam (Panchayat & Rural Development, 2020). Elected women representatives of various Panchayat bodies in seven development blocks of Dibrugarh district and the representatives of three selected development blocks viz.- Panitula, Barbaruah and Tengakhat in Assam Panchayat election, 2018 are shown in Table – I and II.

**Table: I**

**Block-wise Elected Panchayat representatives of PRI, 2018**

Blocks	Male	Percentage (Approx.)	Female	Percentage (Approx.)	Total
Panitula	55	47%	63	56%	118
Lahowal	77	49%	79	51%	156

Tingkhong	76	43%	99	57%	175
Joypur	71	42%	97	58%	168
Barbaruah	62	39%	95	61%	157
Khowang	84	46%	99	54%	183
Tengakhath	73	39%	113	61%	186
Total	498	44%	645	56%	1,143

Source: Zilla Parishad Office, Dibrugarh.

The above table - I depicts the participation of rural women in the last Panchayat election, 2018. The Table shows the women representation in PRIs in seven development blocks of Dibrugarh district. Women's participation in all the seven blocks of Dibrugarh district is above 50 percent. In Barbaruah and Tengakhath blocks, it is above 60 percent. This is due to an increase in the reservation of seats for women from 33 percent to 50 percent. It was increased in 2013 by amending the Assam Panchyat Act, 1994. It proves that women's participation in politics is very encouraging in Assam.

Table: II

Elected Panchayat representatives of the study areas

Study area	Men					Women					Total
	ST	SC	GEN/ OBC	Total	P.C Approx.	ST	SC	GEN/ OBC	Total	P.C Approx.	
Dibrugarh District	93	26	376	498	44%	103	43	499	645	56%	1143
Panitula Block	04	06	45	55	47%	07	03	53	63	53%	118
Barbarua Block	13	7	42	62	39%	23	13	59	95	61%	157
Tengakhath Block	17	03	53	73	39%	19	08	86	113	61%	186

Source: Zilla Parishad Office, Dibrugarh.

Table - II shows the participation of rural women in three selected sample blocks of Dibrugarh district. A total number of 1,143 members were elected to various levels of Panchayats consisting of 498 men and 645 women in this election. The total number of panchayat representatives in three selected blocks is 461 which comprise 271 female and 190 male. The percentage of women representatives in the PRIs under Panitula block, Borboruah block and Tengakhat block are 53 percent, 61 percent and 61 percent respectively. The number of elected women representatives in all the three selected blocks is higher than men. It is a good sign of revolutionary change among rural women towards politics.

The study reveals that women in the age group of 40 to 50 years are more attracted to take part in panchayat bodies. Most of the respondents are married and they belong to agricultural families. It has been observed that the majority of the women respondents are from nuclear families and their economic condition is not sound. It is also found that married women are more active in politics and they are very conscious about rural development. Higher Secondary is the highest qualification of the majority of the respondents. Out of 68 sample respondents, only 5 (7.38%) respondents are found to be graduates. The following table: III shows various demographic aspects of the respondents within the study area.

**Table: III**  
**Socio-economic background of elected Panchayat representatives in the study area**

	Sample size	Respondents
68	Less than 30	Age group
5	30 - 40	
17	40 - 50	
38	50 and above	
8	ST	Caste/Tribe
9	SC	
8	GL/OBC/MOBC	
51	Married	Marital status
65	Unmarried	
3	Joint	Types of family
6	Nuclear	
62	Agriculture	Family occupation
45	Business	
16	Service	
7	Annual income (Rs. in Lakhs)	Family Income
1.5 - 5.0	Below HSLC	Level of education
10	HSLC	
21	HS	
32	Graduate	
5		

Source: Primary source

In this study, it is found that the highest numbers of elected representatives belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and it is followed by Indian National Congress (INC) and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP). Out of 68 respondents of the study area, 48 (70.59%) respondents belong to BJP, 13 (19.12%) respondents belong to Congress and the remaining 7 (10.29%) respondents belong to AGP. It implies that national political parties are

playing a significant role in influencing the political behavior of rural women in Assam. Because of the lack of good leaders and sound organisation, regional political parties are unable to give a good result in the panchayat election 2018.

The study reveals that 61 (89.71%) women representatives were elected for the first time in PRI and the other 7 (10.29%) representatives were elected for the second time. They express their pleasure for being elected as Panchayat Representatives and are much happy to take part in the decision-making process of rural development. Therefore, 61 (89.71%) respondents want to contest in the coming Panchayat election for subsequent time to serve the rural society.

The primary objective of 42 (61.76%) respondents is to serve rural society. They want to involve themselves in the development of rural infrastructure. On the other hand, 18 (26.47%) respondents have their ambition to become influential women in society and the remaining 8 (11.76%) respondents want to build a political career soon.

It is found that 39 (57.35%) respondents organised public meetings to solve local problems in their respective Panchayat areas with their initiative. However, 29 (42.65%) respondents do not organise public meetings to solve local problems with their initiative in their respective Panchayat areas. It is also found that the majority of respondents is aware of local problems and come forward to solve such problems according to the guidelines of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994.

All respondents participated in several training programs. The government of Assam organised a one-week orientation program at the state level for elected representatives to make them aware of their duties and responsibilities after the declaration of the election result. They also take part in training programs at the district level and block level at a regular interval of 2 to 3 months. This is a good practice of the state government that encourages the PRIs representatives to perform their duties effectively. The panchayat representatives are now very active in the decision-making process of rural development.

The sample respondents are fully aware of the reservation of seats

for women in PRIs. However, 20 (29.41%) respondents are not aware of the exact percentage of seats reserved for women in PRIs. It is found that 24 (35.29%) respondents are not aware of all the 29 functions of PRIs and various sources of funds under the new Panchayat Act, 1994.

Both the Central and State Governments provide adequate funds to the Panchayats for the development of rural infrastructure. The Government also grants regular funds under different beneficiary schemes to all panchayats. But the amount of funds varies from one panchayat to another. Mainly Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste dominated panchayat areas get more funds under different programmes or schemes. All the respondents are successfully utilising their allocated funds with the help and cooperation of government officials as well as common people of their locality. They utilise their allocated funds for various developmental activities like construction of roads, houses and toilets, agriculture, fisheries, animal husbandry, poultry, piggery, poverty alleviation programmes, maintenance of community assets, etc.

From the study, it is also found that all the women respondents face various challenges in effective participation in politics. The family burden is the prime cause of the inadequate participation of rural women in politics. All the respondents are busy with their household activities like childcare, cooking, weaving, cultivation and farming, etc. Married respondents are mainly dependent on their husbands in taking various decisions. All the respondents are not fully aware of the various provisions of Panchayats. They are also not financially sound. The representatives are paid a nominal amount of honorarium for their service to the rural people. This amount is very little and it is only Rs. 1,500/- to Rs. 10,000/- per month. This honorarium is also not regular. On the other hand, they are not entitled to draw any extra allowances for their conveyance. Sometimes it de-motivates the panchayat representatives in taking an active part in the political process. All the representatives are not equally competent to perform their duties. It is due to their low level of education, inefficient leadership quality, economic dependence on family, etc.

### **Suggestions for effective participation of rural women in Panchayati Raj System**

Based on the findings of the study, some suggestions can be put forwarded to make rural women more participative in politics. Panchayat representatives need more training to build their self-confidence and decision-making capacity. Political parties should motivate rural women to get involved in politics. Government Institutions or NGOs must come forward to organise, encourage, mobilise and guide rural women for effective participation in politics. The monthly honorarium should be increased for the economic empowerment of panchayat representatives. The Government should also prepare some policies to make rural women aware of their rights and duties.

### **Conclusion**

The effective participation of rural women is extremely important for socio-economic as well as political change in Indian rural society. The study reveals that the political empowerment of rural women has taken place after the inclusion of the reservation provision for women within the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act. The Act induces the women section to come forward from their houses and to participate in politics especially in Panchayats. As a result, numerous women in rural areas were contested and elected as Panchayat representatives. PRI is very much successful in changing the mindsets of rural women within the study area. This study brings into light that women participation in PRI is a way to change the socio-economic life of rural society in general and rural women in particular. However, the participation of rural women in the political process is going to be fruitful if the rural women understand the real meaning of the Panchayati Raj System and are aware of various provisions of the Panchayati Raj System in India.

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